

Disability Sport Conference 2014: Coventry University

Disability Sport: Changing Lives, Changing Perceptions?

For oral presentation only

Title: (Dis)ability by design: Narratives of bodily perfectionism

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Much academic research into disability sport has been accused of reinforcing ableist attitudes, treating disability as a homogenous construct, suffers from theoretical impoverishment, and has failed to listen to the voices of disabled people themselves in providing critical insight (e.g. Brittain, 2004; Moola and Norman, 2012). Excluding a few notable exceptions (Huang and Brittain, 2006; Berger, 2009; Lindemann, 2010; LeClair, 2011; Peers, 2012) there is still a dearth of empirically based research in understanding how disabled athletes construct and negotiate senses of embodied identity. Taking this into consideration, we draw on data generated from a four year ethnographic study into wheelchair sport in England to examine the ways in which disabled athletes engage in self-reflexive “body projects” (Shilling, 1993) in making strong personal statements about their identity amongst contemporary somatic cultures that idealise and “relentlessly promote the body beautiful” (Thomas, 2007: 132).

A structural narrative analysis of the ‘big’ and ‘small’ stories (Bamberg, 2006) told by the disabled athletes in the field revealed three dominant ‘body projects’ in action: 1) in developing **malleable bodies** participants either altered the comportment of their bodies conservatively by building muscle and losing body fat in attempting to become ‘perfectly disabled’ in relation to able-bodied ideologies of body perfectionism, or more radically through desiring amputation of impaired body parts in ways that contest these dominant beliefs 2) in engaging in tattooing and piercing practices that transform the appearance of

the skin, participants artfully constructed **modified bodies**, affording them a sense of control and expression over their identities in a number of ways and 3) **cyborg bodies** were imagined where participants played with the possibilities of evolving technologies on their senses of corporeality.

Taking an inter-disciplinary approach to interpretation, findings suggest that additional significance is held amongst participants living these bodies than exclusively as forming part of a 'body project' alone. Indeed, the identities that disabled athletes embodied and performed should not be thought of as singular, homogeneous, passive, and static but should be better seen as plural, heterogeneous, active, and evolving. We provide reflections that question if identity construction in disability sport is policed by medicalising and ableist discourses with the expectation that disabled athletes should reject their own 'flawed' bodies and align themselves to the carnal norms of non-disabled people (Hughes and Paterson, 1999), or if wheelchair athletes are able to demonstrate agency in relation to these norms and express empowering and proud senses of disabled identity that subvert the "non-disabled gaze" (Hughes, 1999) offering a challenge to contemporary tyrannies of bodily perfectionism.

Character count with spaces: 2929 (max. 3000)

Short biographies:

James is a Senior Lecturer in the Sociology of Sport and Exercise at Canterbury Christ Church University and is in the final year of his PhD under the supervision of Professor Andrew Sparkes (Leeds Metropolitan University). His research interests are in (dis)ability sport, cyborg theory, and how people may modify their bodies in the pursuit of bodily 'perfectionism'.

Andrew's empirical and theoretical research interests are grounded in methodological diversity and inspired by a continuing fascination with the ways that people experience

different forms of embodiment over time in a variety of contexts. Recent work has focused on interrupted body projects (e.g., spinal cord injury) and the narrative reconstruction of self; ageing bodies in sport and physical activity contexts; sporting auto/biographies and body-self-culture relationships; and sensual ways of knowing and being in sport, physical activity and leisure. These interests are framed by a desire to develop interpretative forms of understanding via the use of life history, ethnography, autoethnography, phenomenology, and narrative approaches.